



RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Creative arts and social engagement in contemporary Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The chapter defers to the general principles of the Kenyan Government's National Policy on Culture and Heritage (2010), this study foregrounds the important but often overlooked connection between creative arts and social engagement. The study specifically illustrates the ways in which selected Kenyan creative artists across three distinct artistic genres creatively and imaginatively use their art to foster the kind of wisdom and activism that is required of citizens in a democratic nation. The chapter positions Kenyan creative cultures art as democratic philosophy which is central to ensuring that citizens freely engage with politics of the day thereby promoting democratic governance. Specifically, the study locates three distinct creative artistic genres, which are digital narratives, popular music and participatory theatre and considers the social role of creative artists to imaginatively observe, evaluate and develop artistic models for addressing social problems and to create collective forms of citizen engagement. To achieve its objectives, the study uses a qualitative research approach involving discourse analysis of creative artistic works by contemporary Kenyan artists within the selected genres. The discourse analytical tool helps to sift through key discourse related to Kenyan creative arts and social engagement. The information gathered is interpreted, organised and described thematically.

Key words: creative arts, culture and heritage, social engagement, democracy, Kenya

CREATIVE ARTS AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT: AN INTRODUCTION

On the one hand, creative arts refer to the kinds of activities which use creative expression and imagination through art forms such as music, visual arts, dance, storytelling and other related forms of art. Arai (2013) contents that creative arts denote the kinds of special skills that are required to create a symbolic representation of human and social experience. Arai points to the role of creative arts in orchestrating a holistic experience that creates a deeply humanising social space in which individuals and communities use art's symbolic representations to come to terms with their identities and their lived experiences.

On the other hand, social engagement refers to the extent to which one can participate in a community or society. Carpenter (2019) insists that to engage is to provoke new and prolonged interest and participation, thus, social engagement speaks to the degree to which people are able to get involved and to interact with other people, events and expectations. It also involves the process of working collaboratively with groups of people so as to address issues affecting the well-being of those people. Other scholars conceptualise social engagement as a group of people working collaboratively through inspired action and learning, to create and realise bold visions for their future (Born, 2012). Thus, key characteristics of social engagement include participation and collaboration which are both aimed at achieving a common goal or addressing a common problem. It is the objective of social engagement activities to build trust and communal relationships which lead to sustainable collaborations and positive impacts

that improve the lives of community members as well as public processes. Social engagement is pivotal to well-functioning democracies and is desirable for democracy because it holds the potential to achieve more equitable and sustainable public decisions.

There is a strong connection between creative arts and building capacity for social engagement as well as democratic transformation. Although governments and bureaucrats are in control of overt democratic governance processes, this study shows that creative artists are the force behind the community democratic practices. This study illustrates this connection through an exploration of the ways in which Kenyan creative artists stimulate and support democracy through arts based social engagement activities.

CREATIVE ARTS IN KENYA: GUIDELINES FROM THE NATIONAL POLICY ON CULTURE AND HERITAGE

Anchored on the national Constitution, Vision 2030, regional and international guidelines, the National Policy on Culture and Heritage (NPCH) which was revised in 2010 is aimed at promoting culture as a pillar for cohesion and development. Article 11 of the Constitution particularly binds the Kenyan government to promote all forms of national and cultural expressions through literature, the arts and other forms of cultural heritage. Additionally, the Constitution identifies the aspirations of all Kenyans for a government which is based on values and principles of human rights, equality, freedom, democracy, social justice and the rule of law. In consequence, the NPCH essentially recognises that democracy is not mutually exclusive to arts and culture. The

basis of democracy is steeped within Kenya's socio-cultural practices. The NPCH draws on the national constitution's recognition of the role played by culture as a national base and the cumulative civilisation of the Kenyan people. The NPCH was, therefore, put in place so as to increase the options of every Kenyan citizen to contribute to the socio-economic and political development of Kenya. It is meant to:

“ ...provide an enabling environment for appreciating, protecting, safeguarding and promoting the culture of the people of Kenya as well as to reinforce national unity and pride while stimulating creativity and innovation. (NPCH, 2010, p. i)

There is something implicit in the NPCH which acts as a road map for Kenya's ambitions for depicting and exploring the possibilities and potentials of its citizens through creativity and collaborative national imagination. One of the ways that creativity and a collaborative national imagination is realised is by way of vibrant creative artistic practices. The NPCH underscores the important role played by creative arts in representing the nation's evolving morals, aesthetics and people and societies' aspirations. The NPCH distinctly states that the arts play a crucial role in fostering individual and communal identities and have been critical in engendering dialogue. It is, therefore, clear based on the NPCH's principles, that democratic practices of dialogue and social engagement are most achievable through arts and culture. This study thus, theorises arts and culture as soft power which is able to covertly activate social engagement for the democratic transformation of Kenyan communities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To make sense of the role played by creative arts to effect social engagement in Kenya, this study defers to Ugandan writer and philosopher, Okot p'Bitek's theorisation of the artist as the ruler of society. In his celebrated essay titled "Artist the ruler", p'Bitek (1986, p. 39) has this to say:

“ I believe that a thought system is created by the most powerful, sensitive and imaginative minds that the society has produced: these are the few men and women, the supreme artists, the imaginative creators of their time who form the consciousness of the time...[The] artist proclaims the laws but expresses them in the most indirect language: through metaphor and symbol, in image and fable. He sings and dances his laws.

p'Bitek suggests that the role of the African artist is not just to entertain and to teach, but, it is the artist's vocation to boldly speak the truth to power. According to p'Bitek, art is deeply rooted in culture and culture is lived. So, art can only be able to have deep meaning when it reflects and celebrates a society's philosophy and when members of that society are able to imagine their identities and their lives through that art. p'Bitek further claims that artists create and proclaim the law at a central level in society. He says; "[The] artist creates the central ideas around which other leaders, law makers, chiefs, judges, heads of clans, family heads, construct and sustain social institutions" (1986, p. 39).

It is p'Bitek's views which provide theoretical angle from which to understand the role played by contemporary Kenyan artists in regulating democratic practices, particularly, social engagement. If as p'Bitek contends, the artists

create and disseminate principles that form the foundations of a people's system of thought and action, this study similarly exposes the principles created and disseminated by Kenyan artists to form the foundations of social inclusion.

METHODOLOGY

This study is epistemologically anchored within humanities research and because of the very nature of humanities enquiry, the study adopts a qualitative research methodological approach. Three creative artistic genres were purposively selected, namely, digital narratives, music and participatory theatre. The data collected from these genres is systematically analysed, organised and interpreted through discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is any form of written or spoken language which is interested in the underlying social structures which may be played out within a conversation or a text. Discourse analysis is a suitable data analysis tool because it is not restricted to the description of linguistic forms as commonly assumed, but, it is also committed to the purposes or functions for which the linguistic forms are designed and serve in human affairs (Halliday, 1985). Van Dijk (1988) argues that Discourse analysis is concerned with words used in discourse so as to reveal the source of power, abuse, dominance, inequality and bias and how these sources are initiated, maintained, reproduced and transformed within specific social, economic, political and historical contexts. The selected creative artistic genres will, through discourse analysis, illuminate into the underlying ways in which arts engender social engagement in contemporary Kenya

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Digital Narratives and Social Engagement

The digital revolution has had a powerful impact on the way everyday life is lived and one of the areas in which its impact is visible is the art and business of writing. Writers have had to make significant changes in response to the ubiquitous effects of the digital revolution. Writers in contemporary Kenya have taken full advantage of the versatility of information and communication technology and the omnipresence of the web to publish multifaceted digital narratives. One of the ways in which digital narratives enhance social engagement lies in how they effectively breakdown the barriers previously imposed by the formal complexity of traditional narratives. Digital narratives enhance fast mobility of information and where readers do not understand certain phenomena, they instantly look up words or passages for quick comprehension. Digital narratives are flexible and it is this feature which enhances social engagement because they are fluid enough to meet the diverse needs and capabilities of their audiences. Whereas, traditional narratives such as literary texts were characterised by formal and ideological complexity which excluded many who did not possess the taught skills required to study literature, digital narratives come with the necessary tools such as computer based literary analysis which help audiences to keep up with the writer's imagination. Digital narratives are, therefore, democratic and open; and democracy and openness are fundamental ingredients for effective social engagement. The following are some examples of popular digital narratives in Kenya which are being creatively utilised by writers across a diverse range of writing genres to mediate social engagement:

- **Blogging** is one of the most popular form of digital narratives in Kenya, and blogging is particularly popular among those who are critical of the government. One of the bloggers is Robert Alai who is also a politician who has used the attention of his 1.7 million followers on Twitter to critically engage the government. Social engagement is effectively achieved when his followers actively engage with his posts and use his posts to launch their own forms of social engagement. Like Arai, many Kenyan bloggers use their platforms to discuss political issues and to express their opinions on the state of democracy in the country. A range of political and social issues are brought to the table for audiences to discuss and share their opinions and it does not matter whether their opinions agree or disagree with the blogger's opinions.
- **#stopthesethieves** is a digital narrative developed by Kenyan citizens to participate in protests against government corruption which citizens hold accountable for the major economic hardships faced by the Kenyan citizenry. The movement gained momentum in 2020 and drew attention to massive corruption in government.
- **Digital storytelling** is a powerful tool for sharing personal and collective narratives and experiences. In Kenya, digital storytelling projects by popular writers such as Billy Kahora and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor have given a platform for relatively unknown writers to share their work, to engage their readers and to dialogue pressing socio-economic and

political issues in post-colonial Kenya.

- **Online comedy** clips in Kenya have gained popularity for their humor, satire, political commentary and criticism. Through humorous skits, shows such as the XY2 Show and The Churchill Show have used political, social and religious parodies to speak to a wide range of Kenyan audiences especially the Kenyan youth. Thus, online comedy is a form of digital narrative which uses humor and satire as narrative strategies for social engagement and in the process providing the audiences their own forms of social engagement when they react to and comment on these comedy shows.
- **Citizen journalism** provides unique forms of digital narratives when citizens act as amateur journalists, reporting on events and incidents happening in real time. The forms of citizen journalistic narratives include images, videos and updates that traditional news outlets might not cover immediately.

The impact of digital narratives on social engagement must, however, not be romanticised. Digital narratives come with their own unique set of problems. Indeed, digital narratives have the potential to increase social engagement through public awareness and mobilisation of citizens to demand change and accountability from the government. They also provide a platform for marginalised voices to be heard and to contribute to a more diverse and inclusive public discourse. However, the Kenyan government has a history of cracking down on dissent and limiting freedom of expression, both online and offline. The government has been known to

cancel and regulate online content, arrest and harass journalists and activists, and shut down social media platforms during periods of unrest. Despite these challenges, the impact of digital narratives on social engagement still remains. They offer citizens various opportunities to respond to democratic concerns by creating a record of public opinion and holding officials accountable for issues such as corruption and human rights abuses, and provide evidence for legal action or international pressure.

Popular Music and Social Engagement

Popular music denotes the kinds of music that are not only popular with the masses, but also subversively speaks against oppressive forces. Winston Mano (2007) argues that popular music can act in the place of journalism because as a form of cultural expression, it inscribes the world that is informed by what takes place in society every day. Kenyan popular music exhibits the journalistic features which Mano alludes to. Popular music in Kenya indeed compliments and more effectively expresses what journalists may not be able to communicate. This is because, as Mutero and Kaye (2019) suggest, music tends to offer a platform through which individuals and communities can find voice in contexts where freedom of speech is not always guaranteed. Popular music is therefore a useful tool for enabling cohesion and social engagement when public communication platforms are inhibited and where political discussions are controlled by those in power. Mano (2007, p. 62) rightly articulates:



Popular music communication emerges in spite of its disapproval by officialdom.

It is probably such disapproval together with its ability to raise issues affecting the generality

of the people that makes it popular among the powerless.

Social engagement and popular music are mutually constitutive in the sense that popular music expresses social reality and dictates the agenda for society by generating forms of knowledge for its audience. At the center of both social engagement and popular music is the idea of participation for social cohesion and a sense of belonging. Kenyan popular music has contributed to social engagement in the way it builds strong, inclusive communities by bringing together people from diverse backgrounds to develop meaningful relationships and social networks through popular music consumption and production. Kenyan popular music is rich, diverse and has evolved over the years, blending various genres and styles to create a uniquely Kenyan sound. The following are the different forms of popular music in contemporary Kenya which have made huge strides in constructing the social fabric of Kenya through a diverse range of social engagement activities:

- **Gengetone** is a popular music genre which mashes up rap, reggae and dancehall. It emerged from the streets of Nairobi and is inextricably tied to the everyday experiences of youth living in the streets of the city. It is therefore not just a music form, it is also a lifestyle, a subculture reacting to the urban impoverished conditions in which the youth are compelled to exist. Gengetone is immersed in youth activity and is emblematic of youth subalternity. As an opposition art form and culture, Gengetone provides the subaltern a subversive artistic platform for expressing their concerns. Popular

Gengetone artists include Sailors, Ethic and the Ochungo family (Odidi, 2020). One of the most popular ways in which Gengetone artists enhance social engagement involves the use of explicit street language as a communal construct of urban Kenyan youth identities. Street language is subversively used to alienate mainstream Kenyan culture which is characterised by conservative traditional values. In so doing, it is like the Gengetone artists are proclaiming that the Gengetone lifestyle has got nothing to do with anyone existing outside its confines. The outsider can only take a peek into the culture but will not be able to recognise themselves within this subversive culture and the outsider does not have to validate its value for it is music for and by the subaltern. Because of its subversiveness, Gengetone music is not distributed through mainstream channels. It is popularly distributed through the moving public minibuses known as Matatu. Social engagement effectively happens when the Matatu passenger comes face to face with Gengetone mixtapes which are played throughout the day. In the Matatu bus, communities and social networks are thus formed as the passengers consume the music.

- **Afrobeats** embrace a distinctive indigenous fusion music identity by tapping into Kenyan traditional music culture in an effort to create a distinct Kenyan identity. Artistic collaborations are a common practice and artists augment social engagement through merry live concert shows. Popular

Afrobeats artists in Kenya include but are not limited to Sauti Sol, Bensoul Waumba, Ayub Ogada, Suzanna Owiyo and Eric Wainana.

- **Gospel music** easily fosters social engagement by appealing to popular Christian values which are characteristic of Kenyan mainstream culture. One of the most remarkable social engagement initiatives involves the work of a musical collective known as Stories and Songs. The group came into prominence during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic when people were forced to remain at home and were prohibited from physical socialising outside the confines of their homes. Stories and Songs brought gospel music and stories on social networking sites, particularly their YouTube account. They used gospel music and stories as strategic narrative tools to preach to their audience who came on social media to find community and solidarity. Stories and Songs managed to grow a community of viewers who were eager for innovative ways of worship when faced by the disappearance of traditional ways of worshipping in church.

Based on these three examples of popular music in Kenya, it is apparent that creative artistic practices such as music making are open to many and can be enjoyed by large groups of people. So, popular music becomes a strategic way for initiating a sense of community when artists and audiences engage especially in times of strife and difficulty. Artists produce music and audiences consume music for the same reason, to imagine and to discourse pressing social, economic and political issues of the day in a

way that gives non-threatening voice to people's concerns (Mutero & Kaye, 2019).

Participatory Theatre and Social Engagement

Participatory theatre refers to the kind of theatre productions which make use of participatory approaches to allow the audience to probe, reflect on and respond to issues which concern them. Kenyan participatory theatre is dynamic and is an influential form of artistic expression which engages communities in addressing social, political and cultural issues affecting those communities. It serves as a powerful tool for community engagement, awareness-raising, and social change. In Kenya as in many other countries, participatory theatre has been utilised to address various issues, including healthcare, gender equality, environmental conservation, and political advocacy. Below is an outline of some theatre groups which have used participatory theatre to address different challenges faced by Kenyan communities.

The Ujamaa Theatre Group is a community based theatre group, located in Nairobi which has been using participatory theatre to raise awareness about social issues, including HIV/AIDS, female genital mutilation (FGM), and gender-based violence. They conduct interactive theatre performances and training workshops to encourage open discussions and to promote positive behavioral change.

Safe Spaces Theatre is focused on issues such as sexual and reproductive health, gender equality and violence against women. By involving community members in theatre production and performances, they have so far managed to create safe spaces for discussing

culturally sensitive topics and encouraging behavioral change. This is a huge achievement because in Kenya, like in many African societies, issues of sexual reproductive health are always enshrouded in taboos, silences and secrecies.

Political advocacy is another area where participatory theatre thrives. Here, it has been used in Kenya to get the citizens to be aware and to be involved in democratic governance processes. For example, during election periods, community theatre groups organise plays and educational forums which are meant to encourage voter registration, to educate people about their constitutional rights to vote, and to promote peace during elections.

Environmental advocacy is another common theme for many participatory theatre performances. Some organisations which are involved in environmental conservation and climate change issues have used participatory theatre to address these issues and to promote sustainable environmental conservation. By involving local communities in theatrical productions and discussions, participatory theatre helps to promote responsible environmental practices and raises awareness about the importance of protecting natural resources.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

After all is said and done this study was effectively an exploration of the impact of creative arts in social engagement in contemporary Kenya. The study explicitly illustrated that democratic practices such as social engagement are not a blind spot for creative arts. It is, therefore, crucial that organisations and associations for

creative artists must run collaborative programs with artists and citizens so as to augment further, social engagement which in turn encourages democratic practices. Additionally, the Ministry of education should implement compulsory arts based curriculum in schools for early appreciation of the value of social engagement in modern democracies. Finally, there is a need for the government in collaboration with creative arts and cultural organisations, to come up with a clear roadmap for increasing knowledge on digital narratives and to implement online activist strategies for funding and supporting online creative cultural practices.

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